

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A
Is 56:1:6-7; Rom 11:13-15, 29-32; Mt 15:21-28
August 20, 2023

Today's Gospel passage may seem puzzling to us because its tone doesn't seem to match the Jesus we know. Jesus saying about not giving food from the family table to dogs was probably a proverb at the time, along the lines of "*charity begins at home*." Yet, this moment was recorded by Matthew and Mark in their Gospels for the Church to remember for all time.

This woman was not Jewish. In fact, Matthew uses the old-fashioned word "Canaanite" to emphasize this point. This passage is a powerful and prophetic teaching moment that gives the first hint of the wonderful, multi-generational, worldwide mission of the Church. Jesus in speaking to the woman teaches the disciples and us that his mission is to and for all people.

Jesus did the same thing in the miracle of the multiplication of loaves two weeks ago. He had taught the people all day, and now, at the end of the day, the people were hungry. The disciples want to send them away. But Jesus tells the disciples to feed the people themselves. The disciples reply, "*We can't*." Jesus takes a few loaves of bread and two fish and multiplies the bread and fish in a miracle that feeds the people, and teaches the disciples how they will meet the spiritual hungers of millions through the Eucharist. Jesus then sends the disciples by boat across the lake, while he goes to pray alone.

A violent storm arises on the lake; the disciples become afraid; then, all at once they see a “ghost” walking across the water and they are terrified.

Jesus identifies himself as the one they see and comes walking toward them on the water. He calms the storm and in that moment teaches the disciples that he is with them in any trouble, any distress.

Now, the Canaanite woman comes forward. The Jewish people, and the disciples believe they had an exclusive lock on God’s love, care, and grace. In this brief conversation (discourse), Jesus gives this Gentile woman a chance to show the disciples her strong and persistent faith.

Jesus grants her request and her child is healed. In that gesture, the disciples get a preview of their mission not only to the Jewish people, but also to the world.

Jesus was speaking to the woman, but teaching the disciples that their mission is beyond the borders of Palestine, and he shows them the great capacity for faith that exists among all peoples.

The Church is universal in its mission and reach. That is the truth uniting today’s readings. God through Isaiah says, “*My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples.*”

St. Paul writes to the Romans (in today’s second reading) about God’s plan for all people. But Paul is struggling with the dilemma of why the Jewish people at that time rejected Jesus. He writes that they had the election, the prophets, the covenant, and the promise.

Then Paul realized that God’s purpose behind the Jewish people’s rejection of Jesus was to direct the Church to go to the Gentiles, the

non-Jews. Redemption was for everyone, Jew and Greek alike. In this moment from today's Gospel, Jesus shows the Apostles the faith even Gentiles can have. This is a brief glimpse of the huge harvest that awaits them.

Today's readings remind us that we are a missionary Church, not only to different parts of the world, but also to people around us.

There is a deep yearning for God within every person and we can bring an answer to that yearning. It is true we have to take people where they are, but we don't have to leave them that way. Jesus never did. So often we believe that because we can't evangelize everyone; that justifies evangelizing no one. Or because we can't meet every person's need, we don't have to meet anyone's need. Because we can't share all of Catholic truth with someone, therefore, we share none of it.

The mission of the Church is to be Catholic, that is, truly universal. The Church will never rest until the Gospel reaches every heart, every soul, and every life. You and I are part of this mission.

Pope Pius XII said many years ago, "*by Baptism, we don't simply belong to the Church, we are the Church.*" On a practical level, all Baptized Christians go to places where priests don't go.

All baptized persons speak with people who will never speak with a priest.

All baptized persons encounter people who will never see a missionary. Each of us may be the only personal experience of a Catholic many people will ever know. Do we take the significance of this fact seriously? Each of us is here, not because we have had a vision or a visit from an

angel, but because some human being, mother, father, grandparent, teacher, friend, cared enough to share the faith with us. Are we willing to do the same? Do we ever share our faith or invite one person to Church, to Mass, and to prayer?

We have to take people as they are, but we don't have to leave them that way.

Jesus calls each of us not only to embrace the Gospel message in our life, but also to give a piece of it to others by what we say and do. The more we share Jesus the Christ with others, the deeper his life grows within us. The deeper Jesus' life grows within us, the more we want to share him with others.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.